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ABSTRACT

Teachers who conference well with writers often assume a role different from that of the traditional dispenser of information. A number of components have been identified that underlie good communication practices in helping relationships. Teachers can use the following listening or attending skills in virtually any conferencing format: basic attending behavior, including eye contact, body language, use of voice; minimal encouragement and paraphrase--use of silence, acknowledgement responses, and paraphrasing what the student has just said; reflection of feelings--labelling and working through feelings of the student immediately in the conference setting; inviting a student to discuss the paper, which is often best achieved through the use of open questions. At the end of a conference a teacher needs to help the student summarize what took place and to restate or recapitulate the substance of the conference. Four influencing skills should also be at the heart of any writing conference: positive asset search; confrontation; directives; and self-disclosure. A possible conference format that could be effective in using attending and influencing skills is to: 1) gain a sense of rapport and help put the student at ease; 2) identify what seems to be the biggest concern for the student; 3) help the student solve his writing problems or concerns; and 4) discuss with the student what he will do next with the paper. In knowing and using these skills, teachers will be able to communicate with writers and support them with purpose, insight, compassion, and understanding. (RAE)

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USING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE WRITING CONFERENCE

Philip S. Morse

Good writing conferencers, like good cooks, often work by instinct. The process functions well except for those who would like to duplicate the results but do not know the ingredients. Unlike great chefs who are reluctant to share their recipes, many good communicators encourage and often insist that allied helping professions borrow and even steal their trade secrets.

Experts in communication skills, including a number of leading psychotherapists and counselors, have long insisted that teachers, clergymen, physicians, attorneys, and parents can profitably apply the techniques that skilled counselors use when working with clients. Although the goals and outcomes are different, other helping professions can profitably use many of the communication skills employed by counselors and therapists.

Teachers who conference well with writers often assume a role different from that of the traditional dispenser of information. They also transform the session into something more than just a casual conversation with the student. This same specialized and purposeful interaction is what distinguishes and defines the talk of helping agents with their clients. Counselors and other professionals communicate in a way different from those who engage in regular, everyday conversation. It is the nature of

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that dialogue and its unique ability to help other people that we shall examine and define in the context of the writing conference.

Learning to listen to another person remains a basic skill in almost any helping relationship. Carl Rogers repeatedly states how sobering it is that people seldom truly listen to what others say. He insists that without attentive listening there can be no understanding, and hence no real communication. Because listening behavior is so important, most definitions of helping relationships include suggestions which help a person listen to another with real understanding.

ATTENDING SKILLS

Allen Ivey and associates have identified a number of components that underly good communication practices in helping relationships (Ivey, 1982, 1984). Teachers can use the following listening or attending skills in virtually any conferencing format, whether it be a few quick comments in passing, a longer session with a student in private, or even in the interaction which takes place in a small group or class discussion:

1. Basic Attending Behavior: a. Eye contact---look at the student from time to time but do not stare. Making "gentle" eye contact

is an important initial sign that you are "attending" or paying attention to what he or she is saying.

b. Attentive body language---be natural, and assume a comfortable body posture. In our culture a slightly forward trunk lean, together with a relaxed, easy posture most often communicates attention and interest in the other person.

c. Natural use of voice---speak in a normal, friendly tone of voice. If you wonder about what kind of impact your voice makes on others, have another person listen to an actual session or a tape recording and provide feedback to you.

2. The Minimal Encourage and Paraphrase: Once the conference begins, there are a number of basic responses or Minimal Encourages which can help a student to continue talking (Gordon, 1974):

a. Silence---saying nothing at all is a powerful, nonverbal message advocated by William Glasser and other helping agents to convey genuine acceptance and encouragement. Saying nothing but being attentive and interested suggests that you are listening and that you want the person to say more.

b. Acknowledgement Responses---often referred to as "empathic grunting," acknowledgement responses use verbal cues like "Uh-huh," "Oh," "I see," and often include head nods and a

variety of nonverbal body postures or gestures which let the student know that you are listening.

c. Door Openers---these consist of a few words or short sentences from a student's conversation which pick up on what the student said and encourage him or her to continue. Examples include, "Tell me more," "How did you feel about that?" "Give me an example," "That's something I'd like to hear more about," or the repetition of one or two key words from the individual's past statements.

Minimal Encourages demonstrate that one is listening sympathetically and prompt another to continue the conversation. Paraphrasing is even more important as a way of showing that you, the teacher, are in fact paying attention and accurately comprehending what the student has to say. Paraphrasing is considered by many helping agents to be the key tool in responding effectively to a client. It involves the teacher feeding back to the student the essence of what the teacher thinks the student just said. The teacher does not repeat the student's exact utterance word for word but rather reflects back what the teacher believes the essence of the message to be.

The following is an example of paraphrasing:

Teacher: "So, what kinds of progress are you making on your paper?"

Student: "I just don't like the way it's coming out. I can't seem to think of any ideas."

Teacher: "The paper really has you stumped right now."

The teacher's response does two things: (1) it shows the student that the teacher is listening, and (2) the student is encouraged to continue by either picking up on and continuing the idea of the teacher's paraphrase if it is accurate or clarifying what he or she really wants to say if it is not. For example, if the teacher's previous paraphrase is not quite accurate, the student could say: "Well, I'm actually kind of bored with the paper right now and would like to work on it later."

Many teachers who initially begin trying to paraphrase worry about what they are going to say and whether their response is "correct." It is worth noting that for any given message there are dozens of different ways a good listener can respond. It is best not to fret about the perfect response, but rather to respond naturally to whatever the student has said. A teacher need only stay with what the student seems to be saying and "give back" to the student what the teacher thinks he or she is trying to express (Ivey, 1982).

Since complete objectivity and comprehensiveness in one's response is a difficult if not impossible goal, teachers can learn to make their inevitable selective focusing work for them:

they can concentrate on those parts of the conversation which they believe will most help their student's writing and mirror back those elements. The result, while still employing active listening, enables the teacher to respond to those elements of the student's message which come closest to what the teacher perceives as a solution to the writing task at hand. For example, if the student seems to be having difficulties with organization, a teacher might try to relate the student's utterances to an examination of a logical flow of ideas.

Such selectivity remains a delicate balancing act between what a student would like to discuss and what the teacher thinks the student needs. The danger, of course, is that the teacher might "take over" and not truly hear what the student wants to talk about. When in doubt it is usually best to go with as many of the student's concerns as possible. Most students will make the greatest progress if the teacher attends to where they are at the present time. It may be frustrating not to "correct" an obvious problem, but students are notoriously hard of hearing if teachers address their own rather than the students' problems about their writing. Witness the number of times English teachers correct the same misspellings on the same students' papers. The profession has conclusively established that telling students is not enough.

3. Reflection of Feelings: Many students' responses and writing products come from feelings that reflect or relate to something that happened or might happen in their lives. Not only can a

teacher help a student sort out facts from emotions, but helping to identify emotions is, once again, a way of showing a student that you are listening. In short, reflection of feelings involves a paraphrasing of a person's emotional state.

In reflecting feelings in a conference, the following steps are often the most helpful:

a. Use the student's name from time to time and/or use the pronoun "you."

b. The feelings must be labeled as specifically and vividly as possible. Give special attention to mixed or ambivalent feelings.

c. Use sentence stems such as "You seem to feel---," "Sounds as if you feel---," "John (or any name), I sense you're---" and add the labeled emotion.

d. The context may be paraphrased for additional clarification: "You seem to feel_____when_____."

e. Relection of feelings is most often useful if immediate here-and-now feelings in the conference are labeled and worked through (Ivey, 1982).

The following excerpt is an example of a teacher concentrating on a student's emotional content:

Student: "I'm going to spend the whole summer with my grandparents in Georgia!"

Teacher: "You seem to feel pretty excited about staying with them for the summer."

Student: "Yeh, I sort of am but I'm wondering whether there will be anyone my age down there."

Teacher: "You're happy about going but you might also be feeling a little anxious about not having anyone to play with."

Student: "I don't want to be by myself all summer."

Teacher: "Sounds as if you will feel lonely if no one is around."

4. Open Invitation to Talk: Inviting a student to discuss his or her paper is often best achieved by a response in the form of a question. There are two kinds of questions---open and closed. Closed questions are often factual in nature, frequently begin with "is" or "are" and can usually be answered by a simple yes or no. Closed questions usually deal with particulars or specifc points of information ("Are you taking Biology?") while open questions usually provide more latitude for the student to develop his or her answer.

Open questions beginning with "what" often lead a student to talk about the details of a situation ("What did you hear last night?"). "How" questions most often help a student talk about

process, sequence and emotions ("How did you cut yourself?" or "How do you feel about your new pet?") while "Could" or "Would" questions tend to provide the maximum amount of room for student response ("Could you tell me more about your plans for next year?") (Ivey, 1982).

It should be noted that closed-ended questions tend to put people on the defensive ("Why is she asking me that?"). Similarly, questions which begin with "Why" often make students feel interrogated. For example, "Why didn't you include the color of your car?" may not only be impossible to answer and may also make the student feel that he has done something wrong in some vague, ill-defined way.

5. Summarization: Often, at the end of a conference, a teacher needs to help a student pull together what took place and to restate or recapitulate the substance of the conference. Not only does this put closure on what happened, but it grounds the student, and helps him think of the next step he could or should take. Seeing the wider picture not only reinforces for the student what he has accomplished, but also enables him to draw conclusions, sort out his reactions, and see where he's been and where he might be going.

Summarizations are similar to paraphrases and reflection of feelings except that the time frame is longer and the points expressed cover a broader range.

A teacher can use summarization to: a. begin a conference ("I would like to discuss---," or "In our last conference we talked about---").

b. Clarify what is happening as the conference proceeds ("Could we stop for a moment and see what has been said so far---?").

c. Provide a transition from topic to topic during the conference ("So far you've been talking about---; now---").

d. Summarize what has transpired over the entire conference ("Today we talked about---") (Ivey, 1982).

INFLUENCING SKILLS

Although the five points above define the basic listening or attending skills which should be at the heart of any writing conference, the ability of the teacher to help or influence a writer in some way is also important. The following skills can be employed as additional tools to help a writer, either by encouraging or empathizing with her, actively intervening in the form of suggestions, or by helping her re-think for herself what she is trying to say:

1. The Positive Asset Search: The Rogerian emphasis on positive regard can often be translated into what Ivey calls "The Positive Asset Search" (Ivey, 1984). To be distinguished from praise which

implies a judgmental stance, the asset search is the identification of something positive about an aspect of the paper, the student's effort, or even about herself as a writer. The emphasis on strength and not weakness is what helps people grow (Ivey, 1984, p. 13). Thus, the progress a developing writer makes frequently depends upon teacher encouragement. Too often teachers as conscientious graders of compositions assume a critical stance because they believe that the identification of errors will help a student "correct" what is wrong. However, one's good intentions can often be perceived by the student as a threat rather than a help; hence, emphasis on the positive is important.

2. Confrontation: Occasionally confronting students with discrepancies within their writing can help them develop a new and clearer version of their draft. For example, if a student in the conference speaks of her love of sailing but fails to include it in her paper you might say, "On the one hand you mention you love to sail but on the other hand you don't include it anywhere in the paper." Any clarification of possible discrepancies can help her think through more clearly what she is really trying to say.

3. Directives: Actual directives to a student can be useful but, if overdone, can revert to the old "search and destroy" approach which finds a teacher going through a student's paper and pointing out all the mistakes. Used judiciously, directives can

be helpful to a student. She can benefit from a well-placed piece of information which relates to a writing problem, especially if the directive is objective and non-evaluative. Defining the use of a comma or demonstrating how one can "show" rather than "tell" in descriptive writing can provide helpful and supportive input. A good rule of thumb is to determine how close the directive is to the student's own frame of reference or concern. If it becomes a resource provided by the teacher at an appropriate point in the conference, the suggestion can be a useful teaching tool.

4. Self-Disclosure: Using self-disclosure can help a student see that the teacher has experienced or shares the same kinds of writing problems the writer has. For example, telling a student that you, too, have trouble organizing your facts prior to writing them down can reassure her that she does not stand alone. Again, it is important to remember that the focus of the conference should be on the student's work and the teacher's efforts to reflect back to the writer what she is trying to say. The teacher's own experience should never become the main or dominant focus. Rather, it should act as a supportive illustration or complementary insight to the student's own concerns. Self-disclosure, used in moderation and in the right context, can be a good way of helping a student see that most writers share the same problems, concerns, anxieties, and triumphs.

CONFERENCE FORMAT

Finally, the following is a useful format in any conferencing situation where one can use the above attending and influencing skills:

1. Gain a sense of rapport and help put the student at ease initially: This can be done by small talk, a friendly invitation to help the student ("What would you like to discuss today?") or an opener inviting the student to talk about his paper ("How's it going?") and getting down to business in a cordial and open manner. Often, a good way to get a conference off on a positive note is to discuss initially what the student likes about his own paper at this point. You can agree with him or suggest some other positive things about the paper or the student's effort.

2. Identify what seems to be the biggest concern for the student: Attending skills are helpful here. Such open ended questions as "What don't you like about the paper?" or "What would you like to work on today?" are good questions. Usually concentrating on one or two issues per conference is best.

3. Help the student solve his writing problems or concerns: Any number of attending and influencing skills can be used. Simply asking a student how he would like to handle the problem can lead to the student's owning the solution rather than the teacher. Also, students learn to become independent problem solvers,

preparing them for the time when the teacher is not there to guide them through their writing.

4. Discuss with the student what he will do next with the paper: At this point the teacher helps the student see what his next step will be. Again, a range of attending and influencing skills can be employed. A sense of moving ahead helps the student act on those areas he has identified for improving the paper.

CONCLUSION

A good response to writing springs ultimately from one person reacting to the ideas, feelings, and intentions of another. In an effective writing conference teachers often act out the role of parents attending to the halting and tentative efforts of their young child---they do a little guiding, suggesting and advising and lots of listening, nurturing and reinforcing. As Don Murray states, the only prerequisite to being a good writing teacher is to "keep inviting, encouraging, supporting, establishing increasingly difficult goals---and sharing laughter at failure" (Murray, 1985, p.157). In knowing and using these skills, teachers will be able to communicate with writers and support them with purpose, insight, compassion, and understanding.

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ABSTRACT

Experts in communication skills, including a number of leading psychotherapists and counselors, strongly recommend that other helping professions such as medicine, teaching and the law use similar communication techniques when working with individuals. The article relates the attending and influencing communication skills as defined by Allen Ivey and associates to the writing conference, showing how teachers can use appropriate communication skills when working with their students. Specific suggestions are offered for how to respond to students' writing in a non-threatening way, how to phrase questions which encourage students to expand their ideas, what to do about the teaching of grammar and other skills, and an overall format which can be used for any writing conference.